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Donald Morris / an analysis

Fuse burning when Colby took over CIA

The eventual removal of William Colby as director of Central Intelligence was a foregone conclusion, although the timing is somewhat mysterious.

It was Colby's fate, after an impressive career in the intelligence community, to inherit the leadership on the very eve of the most disastrous and gratuitous explosion in its history. He had time, before the fuse reached the powder, for one positive act as DCI — to restore in large measure the morale which his predecessor, James Schlesinger, had almost completely destroyed in the few months he held the post.

Barely settled in his new office, Colby then had to bear the full brunt of the congressional eruption which in its search for melodramatic horrors and headlines all but paralyzed the single most effective asset a peace-time America had available. (The Soviets refer to their KGB as "the sword and shield" of their government — our own equivalent weapons to counter theirs are now battered and blunted.)

Colby's role in the attack was neither defensive nor a rear-guard action. No defense was possible, given the nature of the attacks or the exposures, and although not personally implicated in any of the areas on which the pitiless light was focused he stood up manfully for the community and accepted the abuse with dignity.

Colby will (he should) be remembered for one striking line — that the United States must have at its disposal an option between a note of

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diplomatic protest and sending in the Marines, an observation of considerably more importance to the national weal than the combined rantings of Frank Church, Otis Pike and Bella Abzug.

The timing of his departure is peculiar. Colby's role was to take the abuse and the exposures, a process that ruins the incumbent for any other purpose. He was foreordained as a sacrifice when the hearings opened and is now being led to the altar — long before the hearings are over or the anticlimactic report (due sometime in the spring) is to be issued.

Colby's successor faces an unenviable role — to be spattered with more mud that, had Colby remained, he might have spared him. The rationale is hard to discern — shakeups are always unsettling and it may be that Colby was simply axed as an adjunct to the concurrent Schlesinger/Kissinger shuffle, to get it all over at once.

The reported choice for Colby's successor is an admirable one personally. George Bush has high intelligence, a proven executive capacity and a thorough grounding in foreign affairs. He is also a total outsider in the intelligence community, a criterion that was also a foregone conclusion.

Given the present climate, neither public nor congressional critics would have sat still for another promotion from the ranks, but the importation of an outsider as a method of "imposing control" on the intelligence community has serious disadvantages.

The CIA was long wont to hold periodic "Clandestine Services Review Courses," to which officers who had been abroad for periods of up to six years were assigned. The course, running a full two weeks from eight to five, featured detailed briefings from virtually all of the division chiefs and many of the branch chiefs, and was simply designed to provide a broad view of what had been going on in headquarters recently. It did not even (for reasons of compartmentalization) touch on the current case load, and was the bare minimum for those already in the course of professional careers to keep up to date.

A DCI from the outside, with no intelligence background, and his hands filled at once with immediate problems, will have his work cut out trying to acquire the background and a knowledge of the case load as well. The last civilian outsider, John McCone, despite impressive personal characteristics, never did make it, but was forced to leave much of the day-to-day case direction in the hands of the in-house staff — leading to less "control" than one might think.

George Bush, in short, is an excellent choice, but his very selection is in the nature of a sop to the critics. His first months will be difficult, and his major task to extinguish the congressional fires and to start the task of rebuilding the agency.